

Inclusive Education

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Abstract

The placement and education of students with disabilities in the general education classroom has generated a challenge and varied opinions for educators, families, and service providers. It is likely that with recent litigation and legislation which supports inclusion and increasing pressure from advocates of inclusion, the trend towards including students with disabilities in the general education classroom will continue. Classroom teachers' and administrators' perceptions along with students' self-perceptions must be considered as these may have a great impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. The purpose of this paper is to address concerns and give helpful strategies for inclusive education.

Inclusive Education

An increasing number of students with disabilities are being involved in the regular education classrooms. Educators have moved away from segregation of students with disabilities in special classes towards the inclusion of such students in regular education classes. Inclusion ensures that no child is left behind. Inclusion involves the placement of students with disabilities in their neighborhood schools in age-appropriate regular education classes with the necessary support services for both the child with disabilities and the classroom teacher. The inclusion movement has primarily been a special education movement. The trend toward inclusion will continue due to recent litigation and legislation that supports inclusion and pressures from advocates in inclusion. Special education resources are protected under IDEA and students with disabilities have the basic right to receive their education in general education classrooms. The phenomenon on classroom teachers' and building administrators' perceptions along with students' self-perceptions must be considered as these may have a great impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities. For the inclusion movement to be effective for all students, the general education professionals, administrators, and parents of students with special needs all need to be involved in the conceptualization and implementation of inclusion (Snyder, 1999). More specifically recent literature on the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings has focused on the preparedness of administrators and educators to develop and implement inclusive models of education that address the social and academic needs of all students served in general education (Brownell & Pajares, 1999). Overall, this paper will address these concerns and give helpful strategies for inclusive education.

Most students with disabilities have been historically served in segregated special education classes. Most or all of their school days were spent working in separate settings with special education teachers and other specialists. In 1975, Public Law 94-142 was passed which opened the doors of public education and general education to students with learning disabilities. Prior to the passage of this legislation, few students with disabilities were provided services in the public schools. The students with disabilities that were provided service in public schools had very little, or no, contact with their nondisabled peers. This has been especially significant in special education where whatever the metric

used-student learning, drop-out rates, graduation rates, subsequent employment, or community living-the current design has failed these students in the past due to these contributing factors. Since Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was passed in 1975, and then reauthorized and renamed The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990, it was mandated that school-age students with disabilities should be provided a free appropriate education in the least restricted environment (Synder, 1999). The placement and education of students with disabilities in the general education classroom has generated a challenge and varied opinions for educators, families, and service providers. "Instead of taking students with disabilities out of the general education classroom and providing them with special instruction in a resource room, the supporters of total inclusion propose that all students with moderate to severe disabilities should be educated in the general education program" (Synder, 1999). The Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997, Public Law 105-17 included a provision in it that a general education teacher becomes a member of each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). "The law mandates that the IEP must directly address student participation in general education setting and must justify placements that are not in general education" (Ghose, C., Head, L. Q., Lindsey, J. M., & Rangasamy, R., 2002). This law calls for collaboration among professionals to improve the education of students with disabilities.

Numerous research studies examine the perceptions of administrators, teachers, and students' with disabilities in reference to inclusion and effective practices. The current research suggests that the success of inclusion depends greatly on teachers' preparation, attitudes, and opportunity for collaboration. Gamerous (1995) suggests that administrators' attitudes towards students with disabilities are especially critical for inclusion to succeed due to the administrators' leadership role in developing and operating educational programs in their schools. Cornoldi, Mastropierem Scruggs, and Terranin (1998) highlighted the nature of teachers' attitudes towards an Italian educational policy over the education of students with learning disabilities after twenty years of inclusion. The participants were general education teachers (74.4% elementary; 25.6% secondary) in ten schools representative of different geographical regions in Northern and Central Italy. The survey contained four items associates with personal support and four items associated with personal acceptance. Overall, 70.3% of teachers agreed with personal acceptance items, and only 14.8% teachers agreed with personal support items. Their survey study reported that elementary teachers had significantly more positive attitudes on personal acceptance items on inclusion than secondary teachers.

Meltzer, Pollicia, Reddy, Roditi, Sayer, & Theoka (2004) conducted a study that focuses on selected intrinsic and extrinsic factors associated with students' willingness to work hard in school, their self-perceptions, and strategy use. The participants consist of 46 students with LD and 46 matched students without LD and their seven teachers. A self-report survey was used to obtain an index of students' perceptions of their effort, strategy use, academic struggles, and academic competence. Learning-disabled students with positive academic self-perceptions were more likely to work hard and to use strategies in their schoolwork than were LD students who had negative perceptions according to findings. Teachers viewed students with LD who had positive self-perceptions as working equally hard and attaining similar level of academic competence as their peers without LD. Students with LD who had negative academic self-perceptions were judged as making limited effort in school and achieving at a below-average level in comparison with their peers. The results indicate a cyclical relationship between students' self-perception and their teachers' judgments and supported the notion of a reciprocal strategy-effort interaction.

In a survey study designed to address teacher collaborative efforts, instruction of students with disabilities, teacher preparedness for meeting the meeting the needs of students with disabilities, and achievement outcomes (Beirner-Smith, Daane, & Latham, 2000), 366 participants were surveyed. The

participants consist of 324 general elementary teachers, 42 elementary special education teachers, and 15 administrators. The items on the survey were grouped into four categories: a) teacher collaborative efforts, b) instruction of students with disabilities, c) teacher preparedness for meeting the needs of students with disabilities, and d) perceived achievement outcomes of students with disabilities. In conclusion, the perceptions of the three groups (administrators, regular education teachers, special education teachers) were mixed in terms of management, teachers having anxiety about collaborating with each other, and regular education teachers not skilled in working with students with disabilities.

In a study of rural general education teachers' opinions of adaptations, Blackbourn, Bryant, Dean, and Elrod (1999) study reflected on regular education teachers providing students with learning disabilities accommodations and/or modifications in order to succeed in the general education setting. Ten general elementary education teachers (3-31 years teaching experience) were chosen as participants because they had students with learning disabilities in their classrooms every year since their tenure. Ten secondary teachers, with various teaching disciplines, were randomly selected (1-20 years teaching experience). The survey contained fifteen accommodations/modifications for teachers to rate for effectiveness, fairness, and realistic implementation. As a result, the rural teachers' survey clearly favored classroom accommodations that are less intrusive to their day-to-day teaching procedures, take the least amount of time to implement, and separate less the learning disabled from the non-disabled students.

Synder (1999) points out that if inclusive education is going to work with special needs, teacher educators, special educators, and administrators are going to have to take a more aggressive approach to preparing the general education teachers for working with those students. The participants in this study were drawn from inservice teachers in graduate level classes and workshops taught by Synder at many sights in approximately one-third of the counties in the state and the university. The subjects were divided into groups of educators:

- elementary schools
- middle schools
- secondary schools
- tech-prep
- career schools

As a result of the survey, most of the subjects surveyed did not think their administrators were very supportive of the needs of the general education teacher regarding mainstreaming or inclusion. Many of the concerns expressed dealt with the administration not offering sufficient training for the general education faculty.

The strategies that will be beneficial to an inclusion program consist of curricular and instructional modifications, promoting normalization, collaboration, and combined-service models. First, regular classroom teachers should identify and focus on the students' strengths and carefully examine the student's academic and social gains. Teachers should plan instructional strategies to address the various learning needs of students. Individual learning needs can be in effective ways by implementing learning activities that would allow the student to respond using modalities such as visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic. *"Regular classroom teachers can consider curricular and instructional modifications for content areas that may include textbooks on tape, readers, note-taking strategies (e.g., carbonless paper, note takers, tape recorder, laptop computer), testing modifications (e.g., extended time, separate location, oral exams, word processor), and the use of instructional aids (e.g., calculator, spell-checker, dictionary)"* (Courson & Hay, 1997). Teachers can facilitate the learning of a

student with a disability by providing hints and prompts if a student is having trouble responding, by incorporating hands-on activities, and by utilizing alternative assignments.

Secondly, “*in order to promote normalization, students with disabilities should be provided social and academic interaction with general education students*” (Brady, McDougall, & Dennis, 1989).

Opportunities for communication and social interaction are increased for students with disabilities within the regular classroom setting. They also may feel less stigmatized. Disability awareness should be incorporated into the curriculum so that studies gain an understanding of their classmates with disabilities. Positive relationships between included students and their peers should be facilitated for success in inclusion. There are numerous other ways to facilitate successful interactions. This includes encouraging and reinforcing appropriate social interactions, presenting the student with disabilities in positive terms to the class, modeling concern for all students, using cooperative learning groups, involving students in making decisions about their learning, and involving parents.

Third, to assist students with diverse learning needs, it is essential that school personnel work in collaborative teams in which skills, experience, talents, and knowledge are fully utilized. The collaborative team approach often facilitates problem solving and shared responsibility. It can provide positive emotional and moral support to members on the team. Teachers should work collaboratively to plan strategies for moving students with disabilities into the regular classroom. They should share information about curriculum and class activities so that the included student benefits from an instructional program that is designed to meet his or her specific learning needs. If confusion arises, team members should feel encouraged to ask questions to seek clarification and to solve problems effectively.

Finally, a strategy that would assist inclusive education is a combined service- model. Combined-service model is a combination of pullout and inclusion programs working simultaneously. The setting provided students with instruction in an inclusion classroom supplemented by periodic instruction in a resource room (Holloway, 2001). Students with disabilities have a tutorial period with the resource teacher whereby difficulties in the inclusion setting are addressed. The resource teacher gives the students extensive support by reviewing the regular teacher daily lessons, discussing homework assignments, and drilling study guides for upcoming tests.

Overall, inclusive education is an effective way for students with and without disabilities to meet their full potential in academic and social areas. For a successful inclusion movement, the general education teachers need skills that allow them to communicate effectively when needed and to implement accommodations and modifications for individual learning. Training on inclusion practices will produce positive teachers’ perceptions of students with disabilities. Administrative support will help eliminate teachers’ negative attitudes on inclusion. Inclusion practice is useful and nondiscriminatory (least restricted environment) for students in our school system.

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